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### 202 extension plan survives as other projects put on hold

by **Sean Holstege** - Oct. 29, 2009 12:00 AM  
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Billions of dollars in voter-approved Valley freeway-expansion work will be postponed and scaled back after plummeting tax revenue forced a regional transportation panel to slash spending Wednesday night.

The Regional Council of the Maricopa Association of Governments voted to cut a \$16 billion freeway-improvement program to just \$9.4 billion.

The projects are funded by Proposition 400, a countywide measure that created a half-percent sales tax and was passed by voters in 2004.

The South Mountain Freeway, a bypass designed to relieve traffic congestion on Interstate 10, survived the cuts. But controversy over that extension of Loop 202 took an unexpected turn when Joseph Manuel, the Gila River Indian Community's representative on the panel, announced that the tribe would be willing to consider a proposal to build it on tribal land. He abstained from the otherwise unanimous vote to cut funding.

Other proposals to build, widen and make other improvements to Valley freeways will be pushed back until after Prop. 400's end date of 2025.

Because of the recession, MAG planners are projecting a \$6.6 billion shortfall over the next 15 years.

MAG has to balance the budget for the massive transportation program every year. To accomplish that, the regional planning agency says it will need to:

- Defer widening 76 miles of existing freeways all over the Valley.
- Postpone 30 miles of new freeways. These include Arizona 801, which would run parallel and south of I-10 to Buckeye; the southern extension of Loop 303 in the West Valley; and Arizona 802, which connects Williams-Gateway Regional Airport to the Santan Freeway portion of Loop 202 in east Mesa.
- Scale back the design and size of the existing Loop 303, as well as the South Mountain section of Loop 202 in south Phoenix.
- Simplify the landscaping, design and sound-reduction techniques used on numerous freeways.
- Defer improvements to about a half-dozen interchanges, including carpool-lane connections for the western half of Loop 101, or Agua Fria Freeway.

MAG planners took pains to point out that deferred projects are not being scrapped but cannot be built without an influx of new money.

New funds could become available if an economic recovery brings in more sales-tax revenues than expected, if Congress passes a transportation bill that steers more money to Arizona or earmarks money for projects in Maricopa County, or if voters here renew the Prop. 400 tax.

Planners characterized their new, scaled-back freeway designs as building smarter facilities rather than lesser ones.

On Loop 303, for instance, proposals originally called for a five-level interchange with I-10 in Goodyear.

It would have been the biggest interchange in Arizona and the costliest, at \$760 million.

But by simplifying the design, planners think they can shave nearly a third of the cost.

Planners also found opportunities to use money more wisely in central Phoenix. The Prop. 400 plan originally called for improvements on Interstate 17 between Dunlap Avenue and the Stack interchange with I-10.

Planners are now exploring whether Prop. 400 money would be spent more effectively if a lane were added in each direction as I-17 runs past downtown Phoenix between the airport and the Stack.

Next year, MAG will begin prioritizing the sequence and timing of projects that survived the cuts Wednesday night.

The South Mountain Freeway is expected to remain the most contentious. It has consumed most of the public's attention and dominated emotional

testimony given during the hearing.

Initially, a three-lane freeway project would extend Loop 202 through Ahwatukee and South Mountain Park to west Phoenix.

The regional council's action means a route along 59th Avenue will now be the leading choice for a connection to I-10.

The freeway plan has horrified many Ahwatukee residents who fear it would destroy their tranquil neighborhood. Members of the Gila River Community, just to the south, said the freeway would desecrate sacred land, where ancestors have been buried for generations.

"Our mountains are alive," tribal member Lori Riddle said. "When one is destroyed, we are broken people."

Some west Phoenix residents say the new freeway is needed to take truck traffic off their streets.

"Truck traffic is already going down 51st Avenue all the way to Tucson. I talk to people all the time in Laveen who say, 'When are we going to get this freeway?' " Laveen resident Wes Limes said.

ADOT is expected to finish environmental work next summer and hopes to get federal approval to build the South Mountain Freeway in 2011.